Nova Scotia

Visitor Information Services Strategy

NOVA SCOTIA
Tourism Partnership
COUNCIL

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The following document contains the highlights of a comprehensive Visitor Information Services Strategy that was develop over the past two years. It is important to note the following:

- Visitor Information Services represents an excellent opportunity to drive incremental tourism revenues in Nova Scotia.
- Visitor Information Services represents a collection of critical information-based services inclusive of but not restricted to Visitor Information Centers.
- It is critical to first understand and endorse the overall goal of Visitor Information Services as presented below prior to evaluating current services.
- Due to an obvious shortage of resources, there is a need to maximize the productivity of every dollar invested in Visitor Information Services such that this goal is attained.
- There would appear to be an excellent opportunity for the Department of Tourism & Culture, the Tourism Partnership Council's Visitor Information Service Committee and the Regional Tourist Associations to work together and develop regional Visitor Information Service strategies that are complementary and designed to meet each regions individual needs and achieve the overall goal, as presented.

  We encourage you to review the information presented below with these thoughts in mind.

The Nova Scotia Tourism Partnership Council's Visitor Information Services (VIS) Committee was tasked to develop and implement a five-year Visitor Information Services Strategy for the province of Nova Scotia's Tourism industry. The Strategy is designed to integrate all aspects of Visitor Information Services, including emerging components of this critical part of the marketing process.

Members of the Nova Scotia Tourism Partnership Council's Visitor Information Services (VIS) Committee who were involved in some way in developing the Strategy include:

Graham MacNeil - Chair
Shelley Acker
Bob Boyd
Betty d'Eon
Darlene Grant-Fiander
Lisa MacIsaac
Paul Stackhouse
Jennifer Taylor
Tanya Taylor-White
Ken Tutty
Shelley Webb
Peggy Tibbo-Cameron

The Strategy is based on factual conclusions drawn from extensive consultation and research of our visitors' preferences and existing services. This Strategy includes market-driven recommendations designed to enhance the quality and level of information services, resulting in increased expenditures by our visitors. The Strategy is designed to be a foundation piece of Nova Scotia's tourism marketing program and more importantly, **designed to be a key part of the building process as the industry strives toward its Vision goal of 100% growth in tourism revenues over the next ten years.** Nova Scotia's Vision for Tourism aims to make dramatic advances in Nova Scotia's Tourism development over the next decade. **The Vision is about change that will create the environment for growth in Tourism. It's about thinking differently, not just adapting.** In order to achieve our goal, we must raise the bar on every aspect of Tourism. New thinking is critical to achieving 'real' growth in our industry. We need to think beyond what we've done yesterday and what we're doing today. Vision is about where we want to be tomorrow. And we can realize this Vision if tourism stakeholders including business, labour, governments, and its partners work together to create a Tourism 1st attitude in the development of our industry.

In addition to the Committee's research, a consultant was commissioned to provide independent, third-party recommendations including analyzing the Committee's visitor survey and operators' questionnaire and researching information from other jurisdictions on visitor information services. **The analysis and research provided the basis for many of the recommendations. The 2002 Nova Scotia Visitor Information Centre Study indicated that nearly 90 % of visitors to all VICs are served at 40 VICs - less than half the VICs currently operating in Nova Scotia.**

The survey further indicated that it is important to have VICs in major centres and at entry points. **The survey also provided opportunities for increasing our revenue as 8% of VIC users indicated that they would spend more time in NS as a result of their visit to the VIC.**

First and foremost, it is critical that Visitor Information Services continue to be recognized as a vital part of the marketing program and that as such the role of these services cannot be underestimated or overlooked. **Visitor information services must develop a selling emphasis, recommending what visitors want and not just providing information.** Marketing has been described as the "facilitation of exchange" and this committee's recommendation is to develop an integrated VIS platform capable of meeting the expectations of **"tomorrow's"** visitors. Upon review, there already exist, excellent examples of Visitor Information Services (VIS); however, these components are not presented as a cohesive program and can be easily overlooked by visitors looking for visitor information in a central, well-organized, and consolidated manner. **The primary objective over the next five years is to integrate new ideas and tools with the most effective and efficient components of the current services to forge a complementary strategy that drives incremental tourism receipts.** This direction is consistent with the overall industry vision of securing **100% growth in tourism revenues over the next ten years.**

In essence, a Visitor Information Services Strategy implies everything from a well-designed Travel Guide, a visitor-friendly web-site, an effective and efficient central reservation service, and an enlightened staff of hosts who are well prepared to "sell" the province to the world. To do this there is a need to **increase and re-allocate resources such that key result areas (i.e. training) are adequately supported.** The Strategy is people focused and promotes the skills needed to sell the province and encourage longer and return visits. The TIANS Human Resource Council will have a significant role to play in helping to achieve this. Current research confirms that, when planning their trip, 73.6% of VIC users obtain information prior to leaving home. 61% indicated they had used the Internet for information on NS before leaving on their trip. These numbers can only be expected to increase and quickly. Our ability to adapt to technological changes will therefore be of paramount importance.

Paramount to this strategy is a willingness to be forward looking, market-driven and also to do things differently. There appears to be a need to change the emphasis from quantity to quality, from reactive to proactive, and from process driven to market driven.

The recommendations presented in the Strategy are to be phased in over a five- year period versus immediate changes in 2003. There are many aspects of visitor services currently being done well as the 2002 market research suggests. Secondly, there are several projects in the works that will provide excellent direction for VIS most notably in the TPC led E-Marketing Strategy and the industry's Vision process. The intent is not to re-invent the wheel but to ensure it is well coordinated, effective and efficient.

Coordination of efforts between the primary and secondary visitor information providers is also a critical recommendation. For example, locally operated VIC's rely on the services of the Nova Scotia Distribution Centre operated by Tourism and Culture; VIC operators rely on services offered by TIANS to deliver appropriate human resource development opportunities for staff; and the department also coordinates the web-site for the province; Check-ins provides a valuable service as well, as do all of the various special interest groups like Taste of Nova Scotia for example. The Doers and Dreamers' Travel Guide is another leading example of visitor information services. **All of this is Visitor Information from the market's perspective and none of it should be managed from a mutually exclusive perspective.**

The Goal of the Strategy is :

To drive incremental tourism receipts through the implementation of a comprehensive visitor information service strategy that is market-driven, pro-active, year-round and capable of providing efficient and effective assistance to our visitors / customers.

Coupled with the goal are four Strategic Objectives:

Strategic Objective #1: **Technology** - Develop all major technological tools and resources to optimal status such that the Tourism Industry of Nova Scotia is positioned to maximize the communication of Visitor Information Services through this emerging and dominant channel of communication.

Strategic Objective #2: **Sustainable Visitor Service Programs** - Combine all primary and secondary components of existing Visitor Information Services into a complementary, Twelve month Visitor Information Services Program such that each continues to function on its own but is connected to the overall objective of providing critical and specific information to our target markets, before, during and after their visit to Nova Scotia and at a time and format that meets their needs.

Strategic Objective #3: **A Commitment to effective Human Resource Management** - Ensure complementary Human Resource Management strategies are designed and implemented resulting in an effective and efficient level of service as demanded by the target markets of the Tourism Industry.

Strategic Objective #4: **Visitor Information Centres** - Develop an effective and efficient

network of Visitor Information Centres capable of providing a provincial perspective and strategically located throughout the province and managed toward continual improvement.

The majority of the recommendations flow from some form of market research resulting in a **market-driven strategy.**

The primary objective for this first year is to select an implementation committee, to orient the entire industry to the plan, to establish the standard operating procedures necessary for a successful roll-out, and to prepare for the intermediate activity scheduled for years two and three. It is recognized that many of the initiatives may take a number of years and a number of recommendations will be ongoing. Further, as research is completed and triggers change, recommendations will need to be adjusted.

The Visitor Information Services Committee recommends the establishment of a VIS Implementation Committee of the Tourism Partnership Council to develop annual action plans and ensure the implementation of the Strategy, as well as to keep abreast of changing technology and adapt to those changes as necessary.

The intention is to place the implementation of the Strategy and its recommendations in the hands of a VIS Implementation Committee of the Tourism Partnership Council. The role of the Implementation Committee will be to facilitate the implementation of the actions in a phased-in approach. It is also recommended that a continuity of membership from the current committee to the new VIS Implementation Committee be maintained. Therefore, key members of the current Committee would remain on the committee and others with a global view of VIS would be added to the membership. The Committee would adopt a proactive, far-reaching view of VIS; generate Departmental awareness of importance of VIS; inspire Industry buy-in; and establish specific action plans for the strategy for years 2 – 5.

After extensive consultation and research the VIS Committee's objective was to develop a comprehensive Visitor Information Services Strategy designed to be a foundation piece of Nova Scotia's tourism marketing program and, more importantly, designed to be a key part of the building process as the industry strives toward **100% growth in tourism revenues over the next ten years.**

"TO ACHIEVE WHAT WE HAVE NEVER ACHIEVED – WE MUST DO WHAT WE HAVE NEVER DONE."

First and foremost, it is critical that visitor information services be recognized as a vital part of the marketing program and that as such the role of these services cannot continue to be underestimated or overlooked. Visitor information services must develop a selling emphasis, recommending what visitors want and not just providing information. Marketing has been described as the "facilitation of exchange" and this committee's recommendation is to develop an integrated VIS platform capable of meeting the expectations of **"tomorrow's"** visitors. Upon review, there already exist excellent examples of visitor information services; however, these components are not presented as a cohesive program and can be easily overlooked by visitors looking for visitor information in a central, well-organized, and consolidated manner. **The primary objective over the next five years is to integrate new ideas and tools with the most effective and efficient components of the current services to forge a complementary strategy that drives incremental tourism receipts.** This direction is consistent with the overall industry vision of securing **100% growth in tourism revenues over the next ten years.**
This Strategy will result in a shift in focus away from the Visitor Information Centre and away from the common perception that visitor information services are "in-province" marketing initiatives that are the final transaction of the province's marketing and promotion program. **The reverse is in fact closer to the truth.** Current research confirms that, when planning their trip, 73.6% of VIC users obtain information prior to leaving home; 61% indicated they had used the Internet for information on NS before leaving on their trip. These numbers can only be expected to increase and quickly.

In essence, a Visitor Information Services Strategy implies everything from a well-designed Travel Guide, a visitor-friendly web-site, and an effective and efficient central reservation service to an enlightened staff of hosts who are well prepared to "sell" the province to the world. To do this there is a need to **increase and re-allocate resources such that key result areas are adequately supported.**

Paramount to the successful implementation of this Strategy is a willingness to do things differently. There is a need to change the emphasis from quantity to quality, from reactive to proactive, and from process-driven to market-driven.

The recommendations presented below are to be phased in over a five-year period versus all the changes being implemented in 2004. There are many things currently being done well, as the 2002 market research suggests. In 2002, Nova Scotia saw a 2 % increase in visitation and a 17% increase in provincial VIC use. Moreover, there are several projects in the works that will provide excellent direction for VIS, most notably in the TPC-led E-Marketing Strategy. The intent is not to re-invent the wheel but to ensure that the process is well coordinated, effective and efficient.

Coordination of efforts between the primary and secondary visitor information providers is also a critical recommendation. For example, locally-operated VICs rely on the services of the Nova

Scotia Distribution Centre operated by Tourism and Culture; VIC operators rely on services offered by TIANS to deliver appropriate human resource development opportunities for staff; the Department also coordinates the web-site for the province; Check In provides a valuable service as well, as do all of the various special interest groups like Taste of Nova Scotia, for example. The Doers' and Dreamers' Travel Guide is another leading example of visitor information services. **All of this is visitor information from the market's perspective and none of it should be managed from a mutually exclusive perspective.**

The re-structuring of Nova Scotia's visitor information services is felt to encompass four key areas:

1. Technology
2. Sustainable Visitor Service Programs
3. Human Resource Management
4. Visitor Information Centres

The primary objective for this first year is to select an implementation committee, to orient the entire industry to the plan, to establish the standard operating procedures necessary for a successful roll-out, and to prepare for the intermediate activity scheduled for years two and three. It is recognized that many of the initiatives may take a number of years and a number of recommendations will be ongoing. Further, as research is completed and triggers change, recommendations will need to be adjusted.

Strategic Objective #1: Technology

Enhance the use of technology as an integral part of VIS to ensure the needs of the visitors are met today and tomorrow.

Short-term (Year 1)

1. Initiate the process of market-driven and visitor-focused orientation and discovery with those involved in the provincial E-Marketing Strategy to prepare for the intermediate term direction.

Intermediate term (Years 2 and 3)

1. Review and adopt all TPC's E-Marketing recommendations that are in congruence with this overall VIS Strategy.
2. Ensure the provincial web-site provides a visitor information services icon on the home page.
3. The web-site should provide a service that is easy to identify and also capable of high conversions to operators, is well maintained and leading edge, and is inclusive of all visitor information services identified in this document.
4. Ensure the visitors have public access to technology / Internet when visiting the Full Service Level VICs.
5. Enhance links page on Novascotia.com and ensure the importance of site maintenance is promoted throughout the industry.
6. Increase the availability of all provincial literature and regional guides on-line.
7. Research the impact that technology will have on VIS in the future and be positioned to develop strategies to meet emerging conditions (i.e., GIS mapping, phone based e-mail systems, etc.).

Longer-term (Years 4 and 5)

1. Combine Checkinnovascotia.com and Novascotia.com, and provide an opportunity for on-line customer feedback on visitor information services.
2. Introduce a C D ROM version of the Doers'& Dreamers' Guide and other visitor servicing literature for visitors.
3. Research partnership opportunities with wireless application service providers.
4. Monitor emerging technology for applications (i.e., cars with built-in computers) that may have an impact on future VIS strategies.

Strategic Objective #2: Sustainable Visitor Service Programs

Combine all primary and secondary components of existing visitor information services into a cohesive, **twelve-month visitor information services program** such that each component continues to function effectively but is integrated with the overall objective of providing critical information that meets the needs of our target markets.

Short-term (Year 1)

1. Establish a VIS implementation committee, orient the entire industry to the plan, establish the standard operating procedures necessary for a successful roll-out, and prepare for the intermediate activity scheduled for years two and three.
2. Establish a Check In Advisory Board and conduct a periodic review from both a visitor's and an operator's perspective.
3. Move Kiosk program from "Sales and Partnerships" to "Marketing - Visitor Information Services".
4. Review and revamp all existing VIS programs (i.e., Fair and Friendly) where appropriate.
5. Improve the awareness of all VIS including the provincial web-site and the toll-free number.
6. Develop a Tourism Awareness Campaign to educate and inform the industry and government as well as the visitors. The campaign would be designed to ensure all players understand the value and opportunities which are involved in quality service to our visitors and to fully realize our potential.
7. Coordinate a study tour / best practices tour to a destination that is a recognized leader is visitor servicing. On an ongoing basis, regularly monitor best practices of other jurisdictions.

Intermediate term (Years 2 and 3)

1. Utilize the Doers' and Dreamers' Guide to illustrate the VIS "program" that is available for the use by the visitor to enhance their travel experiences.
2. Ensure there is a twelve-month focus on the promotion and availability of visitor information services for Nova Scotia.
3. Encourage innovative partnerships and opportunities to strengthen VIC operations, reduce reliance on government-sponsored programs, and encourage innovative revenue-generating ideas.
4. Facilitate a joint visitor information services seminar annually (TIANS Conference) to evaluate the coordination of all visitor information services partners.
5. Review and build toward high quality regional literature that is customer focused then promote greater use of regional tourist guides and other guides.
6. Develop a Kiosk operational manual for venue operators.

Longer-term (Years 4 and 5)

1. Provide an annual review of all methods of literature distribution.
2. Evaluate visitor exit surveys from a VIS perspective and a frequency perspective.

Strategic Objective #3: A Commitment to Effective Human Resource Management

Ensure complementary Human Resource Management strategies are designed and implemented, resulting in an effective and efficient level of service as demanded by the target markets of the Tourism Industry of Nova Scotia.

Short-term (Year 1)

1. Incorporate and/or develop training tools based on national standards, to ensure a highly skilled staff with comprehensive product knowledge capable of encouraging longer stays and repeat business.
2. Develop a "sales culture" in all visitor servicing staff such that counselors are providing specific recommendations based on visitors needs and wants where requested, rather than just providing general information.
3. Enhance and develop product knowledge training to ensure provincial perspective.
4. Ensure the Department of Tourism and Culture allocates the resources required to manage the VIS Strategy as a critical component of the Provincial marketing plan.
5. As part of the fee for service agreement with the Department of Tourism and Culture, all RTIAs must ensure VIC staff receive required training (provincially or RTIA administered).

Intermediate term (Years 2 and 3)

1. Incorporate measurable training benchmarks as part of the Award of Quality Program.
2. Establish Benchmarks for Certification at each VIC Service Level.
3. Implement provincial product knowledge training as a mandatory component of annual orientation for VIC staff.
4. Ensure on-going development of a sales focus in VIS.
5. Develop a strategy to address management and supervisory training for the VIC supervisors, that would work toward Certification.
6. Develop evaluation methodologies capable of bench marking visitor satisfaction with the province's Visitor Information Services programs.
7. Develop a training kit for every VIC that would provide resources for ongoing professional development of staff (HR practices, OHS , trainers' guides, etc.)

Longer-term (Years 4 and 5)

1. Implement training kits for all NS visitor servicing.
2. Provide access to on-line training resources.
3. Establish remuneration policies for travel counselors.
4. Promote the value of human resource investment in all visitor services.
5. Promote the value of language training within the educational community.

Strategic Objective #4: Visitor Information Centres

Develop an effective and efficient network of Visitor Information Centres capable of providing a regional as well as a provincial perspective, offering varying levels of service, strategically located throughout the province. Individual VICs and Tourism Associations should be encouraged to focus on quality and availability of service versus quantity of services.

In moving forward with the industry's Vision for Tourism, the role of visitor information services and the visitor centres needs to be more fully developed. The Department of Tourism and Culture and the VIS Committee will work with RTIAs and industry groups toward this goal.

Short-term (Year 1)

1. Develop a credible methodology for statistics gathering and VIC auditing for formula calculation purposes.
2. Request a transfer of authority for the PEP funds from the Office of Economic Development to the Department of Tourism and Culture. Once transferred, this fund will then be called the "Visitor Information Centre Employment Program."
3. Develop and introduce standard operating procedures for VIC evaluation purposes.
4. Review and revamp the Award of Quality Program to ensure it can dependably maintain minimum standards at all times, and encourage continual improvement.

Intermediate term (Years 2 and 3)

1. Develop a policy ensuring that any locally operated VIC that is located in a provincial VIC and receives PEP funding must contribute to operational costs of the building.
2. Develop and implement a service level approach to VIC classification based upon a mix of services and amenities.
3. Invest in counselors' up-sell training and general awareness from a provincial perspective.
4. Implement the revised Award of Quality Program.
5. Monitor all kiosk locations to ensure effectiveness is evaluated annually.
6. Ensure an effective promotional campaign is implemented to inform visitors of the services provided (i.e., print, signage, etc.).
7. Provide a modified kiosk program specific to rest areas during non-staffed periods, and pursue a tourism component within the rest area criteria, equivalent to Intermediate Service Level.
8. Review the policy of private sector literature distribution to all VICs and incorporate enhancements that will provide an improved return on investment.
9. Expand the availability of computers and Internet access for the visitor's use.
10. Establish a VIC satisfaction survey process and standards to monitor the process.

11. Promote, where justified, year-round VIC services in strategic areas of the province and encourage season extension in major centres and key entry points.
12. Enhance the availability and access to multilingual services at VICs.

Longer-term (Years 4 and 5)

1. Support establishing / relocating VICs to more strategic locations (i.e., 100-series highways).
2. Establish "best practices procedures" and other VIC management "standard operating procedures" to ensure a consistent and complementary network of services.
3. Investigate consolidation of VICs in communities that have two VICs not housed in the same building.